



U.S. Coast Guard (Adam Eggers)

Above: U.S. Coast Guard uses high-speed law enforcement boat to combat flow of narcotics through Gulf of Mexico to United States
Below: Border Protection agents train in urban environment

With all eyes on the Iraq war and terrorist cells in the Middle East, terrorist activities in Mexico have received little attention from the American public or media.¹ Yet narcoterrorist activities in Mexico pose a danger to hemispheric security. In order to counter these activities and win the war on terror, the United States must strengthen relations and cooperation with its southern neighbor.

Mexico is more than just a gateway for drugs, however. It also serves as an entry to South America for ideas, business, and political support. It is our second-largest trading partner and third-largest source of imported petroleum. Strong U.S.-Mexico relations are thus essential from not only a geopolitical standpoint but also economically and socially. The 1,980 miles of shared border make it imperative that the two countries work together to solve their common problems.

Assessing the Threat

Terrorist organizations are increasingly using drug trafficking as a means to fund operations. For example, in Afghanistan, the Taliban taxed poppy farmers to fund its government. For years the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC) and other terrorist organizations in South America taxed drug farmers to fund operations and resistance movements. More recently, these groups have delved into the business of transporting these drugs because it is often more lucrative than any other means to raise funds.

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By AMANDA M. LEU



FIGHTING Narcoterrorism

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (James Tourtellotte)

The major illicit drug suppliers to the United States are in Latin America, especially Colombia, and they use Mexico as a channel to funnel drugs north. The border between the United States and Mexico has always been vulnerable to drug, human, and arms trafficking, so it provides the perfect place to operate a front business for terrorist funding and to gain access to the United States. Moreover, terrorist organizations do not necessarily need to collaborate with drug traffickers to take advantage of the lawlessness and instability created by warring drug cartels. One U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration official stated, “What we know for sure is that persons associated with terrorist groups have discovered what cartels have known all along: the border is the back door into the U.S.”²

Of the illicit drugs entering the United States, 80 to 90 percent are trafficked through Mexico.³ The high volume of drugs transported has caused a spike of drug use in Mexico, prompting the government there to crack down on traffickers. The problem in Mexico is really threefold: the United States has done little over the past years to support counterdrug operations there; Plan Colombia has created a balloon effect in narcotics production, forcing drug cartels to relocate from Colombia to other South American countries; and the competition between cartels in Mexico and other countries has increased violence and corruption to an almost war-like level. Many Mexican authorities and institutions are at a breaking point. People’s lives are in danger and they do not know whom to trust. Moreover, the cartels are better funded than many government agencies.

Mexico has been profoundly affected by drug trafficking. Levels of violence, corruption, and internal drug abuse rose in 2006. Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) control domestic drug production and trafficking, as well as the laundering of drug proceeds. These DTOs have set up such an extensive network and infrastructure within some regions of Mexico that they have undermined and intimidated law enforcement and public officials. According to open news sources in Mexico, the drug cartels, particularly the Gulf cartel, are engaged in an intimidation campaign against law enforcement and local officials. During a recent

military operation, Sonora II, it was found that the “police and authorities are sheltering organized crime groups . . . for whatever reason the drugs and weapons were never detected due to ‘strange’ reasons.”⁴

What is more disconcerting is that in light of the growing violence in Mexico, it was publicly learned that “Islamic extremists embedded in the United States—posing as Hispanic nationals—are partnering with violent Mexican drug gangs to finance terror networks in the Middle East.”⁵ Extremists could plausibly exploit vulnerabilities along the border for operations other than funding purposes.

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Terrorism and Drug Traffickers

Growing anti-Americanism (that is, anti-U.S. Government sentiments) in Latin America over the last decade has lent itself to progressively left-leaning and radical ideology. In the past, figureheads such as Fidel Castro encouraged illicit drug trafficking to the United States as a means to weaken the American population. Today, the threat comes from foreign travelers originating abroad and coming to Latin America to use Mexico as a port of entry into the United States. In 2006, Mexico detained 182,715 illegal migrants, most from Central and Latin America.⁶ The tri-border region (Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay) has been nicknamed the “Muslim Triangle meeting zone.” South America has always had problems with radical groups and extremists using drug money to fund operations against established governments, but because these groups never targeted the United States directly, they were not a major concern. In the past, Washington has observed particularly violent groups such as FARC, National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, or ELN), and the Communist Party of Peru (*Partido Comunista del Perú*)/Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*, or SL), but the U.S. public perception has always been that drugs are a personal problem and not an impending danger to homeland security.⁷

To say that there is a direct and unquestionable link between DTOs and radical/terrorist groups within Mexico is neither accurate nor reflective of the status quo. These groups operate under different leadership and usually their end goals are not the same; however, they do carry out many of the same functions through organized crime. Both terrorists and drug organizations raise money through illegal means; use front organizations to store, transfer, and distribute money; and use that money to fund more illegal activities. Because both groups use similar methods, it only makes sense that they would find a way to collaborate. Usually, neither group has any moral objections to the other’s objectives, and one can imagine that the terrorist message could strike a chord with Mexican and Latin American publics who are disenchanted with the United States.

Because these two groups regularly operate in many of the same ways, they can also be tracked in many of the same ways. Short of well-established and operational human intelligence capabilities, the best way to track these illicit activities is to follow the money.

Looking at past trends, drug cartels have routinely collaborated with terrorist organizations. Mark Steinitz of the Center for Strategic



ICE agents repatriate former Mexican police officer wanted in Mexico in connection with drug-related killings

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Amanda M. Leu supports the U.S. Northern Command Plans, Policy, and Strategy Directorate (J5)/Theater Security Cooperation as part of the Homeland Security and Defense Consortium Internship Program.

and International Studies outlined the history of competition and collaboration. According to Steinitz, Colombian drug trafficker Jaime Guillot-Lara delivered arms to a Cuban client (*Movimiento 19 de Abril*, or M-19) in exchange for Cuban protection of his drug shipments in 1981. Jamaican authorities seized a vessel containing 10 tons of weapons for FARC in 1988. It was later learned that the whole organization was underwritten by Colombian cocaine dealers. In 2000, another

tion for the lucrative profits to be gained from old and new DTOs.

Sendero Luminoso is a terrorist organization thought to have been disbanded after its leader was arrested in 1999, yet the group has recently reemerged due in part to the fresh drug money from cartels in Peru. By providing protection to coca growers and traffickers, SL members have received enough cash, supplies, and connections to rekindle the dying organization.⁹

groups with members of drug cartels, terrorist organizations, and well-known arms dealers. Officially, FSP rhetoric discourages acts of aggression. However, because of the radical beliefs of some members, in addition to the close proximity the meetings bring them into, the forum enables groups that might not otherwise collaborate to discuss common beliefs and goals. By bringing a variety of politically oriented people together to talk about the “evils” of capitalism and U.S. policies, it is likely that some individuals collaborate on more actionable ways to reach shared goals. The combination of drug traffickers, radical groups, and anti-American ideology is a disturbing thought indeed.

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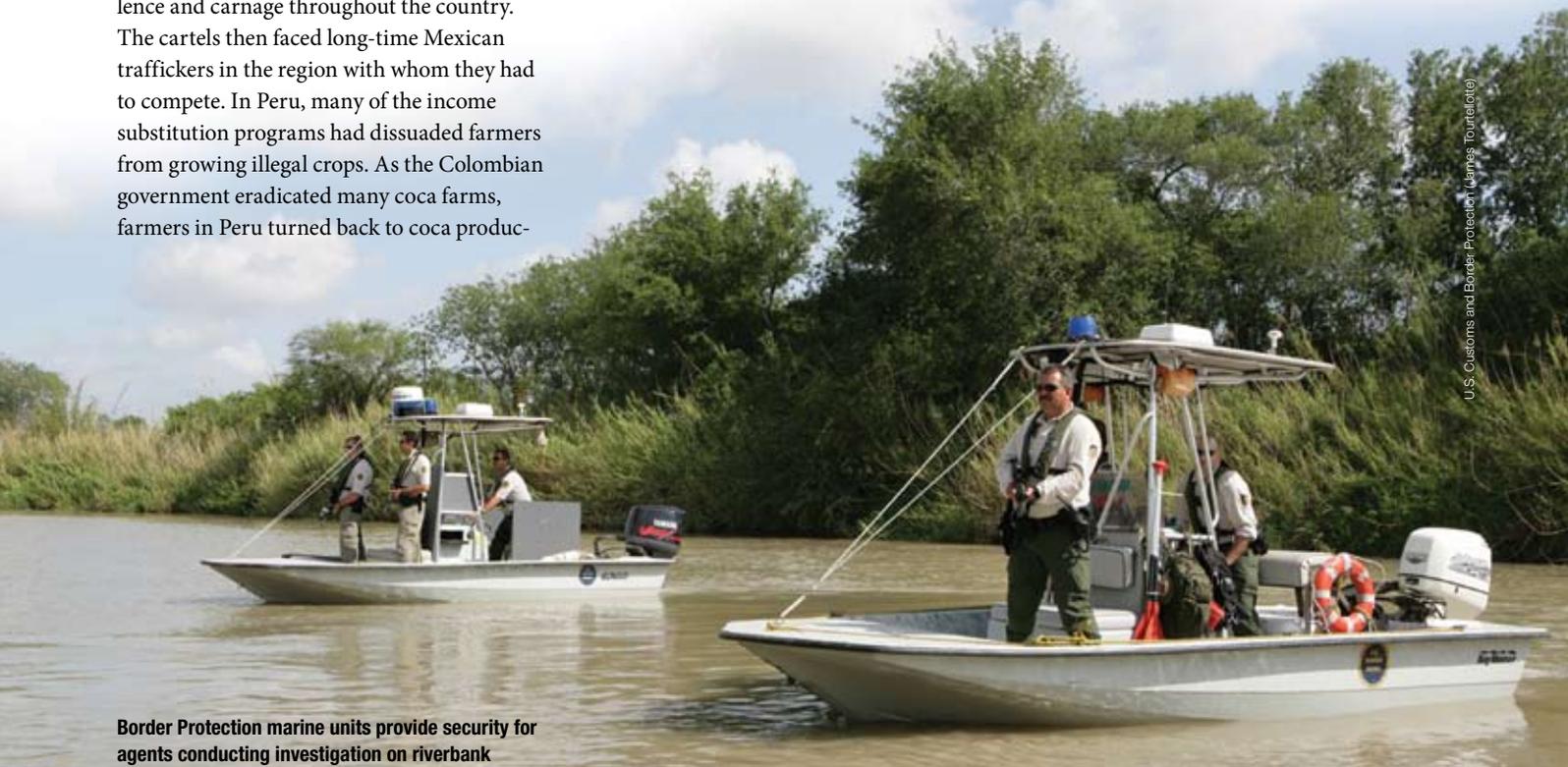
investigation found that FARC's 16th Front netted close to \$15 million in a 2-year period. In 2002, the U.S. Justice Department indicted three FARC members for selling cocaine to traffickers in return for cash, weapons, and other equipment.⁸

Colombia, with the help of the United States, has been able to disband some drug cartels through operations such as Plan Colombia. Cartels found it hard to operate in Colombia, so they relocated in order to continue meeting demands. Peru seemingly became a popular new home for many cartels, as evidenced by the increasing violence and carnage throughout the country. The cartels then faced long-time Mexican traffickers in the region with whom they had to compete. In Peru, many of the income substitution programs had dissuaded farmers from growing illegal crops. As the Colombian government eradicated many coca farms, farmers in Peru turned back to coca produc-

Drug and terrorist connections can also be traced back to political leaders and authorities. One public example of linkages between leftist organizations and terrorism is the Sao Paulo Forum (*Foro de São Paulo*, or FSP). In its earlier days, members included FARC and the ELN. The presence of these groups at forum meetings brought negative media coverage, and FARC and ELN were recently asked to no longer attend. Whether or not these groups still send unofficial representatives is unknown, though suspicions abound; but recent meetings of the forum have connected radical political

Mexican Perspective vs. Washington Consensus

For either the United States or Mexico to dismantle DTOs and cut off terrorist funding, both countries need to learn to work cooperatively. Historically, the countries have had a strained relationship at best. Mexican authorities are still distrustful of the United States and its military because of what they perceive as empty promises, one-sided agreements, and historical wounds that date to the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848.¹⁰ In an age of transnational criminal networks and terrorist organizations, there is no better time



Border Protection marine units provide security for agents conducting investigation on riverbank

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (James Tourtelotte)

for the United States and Mexico to heal old wounds and step forward.

If we consider that the war on drugs is helping to take down those same criminal networks associated with drug trafficking, then a simple look at the facts proves Mexico is doing its part and much more. The Mexican army focuses on three missions: repelling external aggression, providing internal security, and defending against natural disasters.¹¹ Of these missions, counterdrug operations and counterterrorist operations are one and the same, falling under the second mission of protecting the internal security of the country. Therefore, training and equipment for counterdrug operations also work as counterterrorist training and equipment. Many congressional leaders would say that the war on drugs does not take priority over the war on terror, but in Mexico there can be little separation between them.

Every month, nearly 40 Mexican military and federal personnel sacrifice their lives for the war on drugs.¹² Mexico is struggling to contain a war among the major cartels that had cost more than 1,500 lives as of August 2007, and over 2,000 during 2006.¹³ For the Mexican people, the war on drugs is a daily reality in which disappearances, kidnappings, and executions are common occurrences. Since last year, the number of executions and homicides has increased as much as 40 percent in some regions, and in the Mexican state of Guerrero, drug-related deaths rose from 292 to 382.¹⁴

Since his popular election to the presidency in 2004, Felipe Calderón has earnestly called on the United States to be more active in antidrug actions. The Mexican perspective is that Washington should take responsibility for the effects of the country's appetite for illicit drugs. On the other hand, Mexican congressmen do not want to appear too eager to work with the United States in case it should cause a public opinion backlash.

Mexico was long considered a Third World country, but much has changed. Within the last decade, a growing middle class has begun demanding that the government find ways to provide them with a basic level of security and stability. That has been a hard order to fill for Calderón because of the violence between drug cartels and organized crime. Limited funds and other restrictions have kept Mexico from obtaining critical intelligence collection equipment and the resources needed to track questionable

activities. Essentially, Mexico is saying that it cannot fix what it does not know is broken.

From the American perspective, many regional experts are concerned that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) will find their way across the U.S.-Mexico border because the Mexican military does not have the resources or training to detect these materials. The United States has been working with the Mexican government to equip all of their major ports and U.S.-Mexico points of entry with WMD detection capabilities. Regional experts also believe there is a strong disincentive for Mexican traffickers to help terrorists for fear of U.S. retribution. Still others believe that the United States will not act until after an incident or attack has occurred that is directly linked to Mexico.

To combat the drug cartels, Mexico has deployed large numbers of troops to strategic regions. President Vicente Fox first started using the military to assist local law enforcement with minor conflicts, but it was not until President Calderón came to office that the military was extensively engaged to hunt down and exterminate DTOs. Over the summer of 2007, Mexico saw an increase in the number of soldiers deployed to help law enforcement fight drug cartels and another increase following the Petróleos Mexicanos¹⁵ gas line attack. Additionally, President Calderón's crackdown on corruption seems to be a large contributor to the continued deployments. As more local law enforcement officials are charged with fraud, waste, and

abuse of power, military deployments are needed to replace those indicted.¹⁶

Countering Drugs to Counter Terrorism

The creation of U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) in 2002 was essentially to protect the American homeland, but within its area of operation, the command is also responsible for establishing good relations with its Mexican counterparts. Hurricane Katrina was the first time the Mexican military provided civilian support within U.S. borders. The collaborative efforts between U.S. and Mexican troops following Hurricane

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Katrina encouraged the development of other joint initiatives and plans. While many of these initiatives are still in initial stages, parties on both sides recognize that military cooperation is essential to counter transnational security threats.

The Policy and Plans Division of USNORTHCOM coordinates U.S. military professional and technical education and training with the Mexican military to help it to professionalize. The classes provide a



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent searches entrance to tunnel from Nogales, Arizona, to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, in joint operation with ICE, DEA, and Sonora State Police

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration

range of expertise from radar operation, to boiler maintenance, to intelligence analysis. Collaborating on these programs is essential; it not only establishes trust, but also creates a framework in which the two countries can share information, develop system interoperability, and better understand joint capabilities in the event of a crisis.

Currently, USNORTHCOM only provides training and limited funding under American Service-Members' Act sanctions,¹⁷ but it is pursuing means to provide the Mexican military with appropriate equipment to address WMD threats and terrorist vulnerabilities. Correspondingly, any training the Mexican military receives to track drug money and criminal networks could also be used to seek out terrorist organizations. In fact, the supplies, equipment, training, and funding the United States provides to Mexico for counterdrug efforts should be considered by all as dual-use for the war on terror as well.

At the end of summer 2007, after a strategic briefing on the region, President George Bush personally called President Calderón to assure him that the United States wanted to



U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration

Extradited leader of Gulf cartel is led off plane in Houston to face drug trafficking charges

provide assistance and support. Indeed, the Bush administration appears close to finalizing a deal involving hundreds of millions of dollars that would aid Mexico in combating drug cartels. The proposal would include telephone tapping equipment, radar to track illegal shipments by air, aircraft to transport Mexican antidrug teams, and assorted training in addition to efforts already under way. Unfortunately, there are still many skeptics in Washington who fear what this agreement may mean for U.S.-Mexico relations. It could force more intimacy than many are used to.

Despite geographic proximity and warm relations, the United States is still far from having a close partnership with Mexico.¹⁸

The relationship is delicate and fraught with uncertainty. Looking toward the future, many matters will need addressing before the two countries can learn to work seamlessly with each other. As with any new initiative, extreme care and sensitivity to cultural differences need to remain top concerns. If an enhanced relationship is to be fostered with Mexico, our southern neighbor must be treated as an ally and given every consideration. Because of past misgivings, stepping forward with such initiatives will be a risky business on both sides of the border. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ As this article was being researched, there were scant U.S. news articles or scholarly journals that addressed the rising tensions in Mexico and the need for greater U.S. support there. Many of articles used to support current trends come from Spanish sources.

² Sara A. Carter, "Terrorists Teaming with Drug Cartels," *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2007.

³ See the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, available at <www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/>.

⁴ Drug cartels are employing the same methods as terrorist organizations by using kidnapping to intimidate and/or extort money from adversaries. A good example is the kidnapping of a police chief's brother. See Alberto Medina, "Levantán a hermano de jefa policiaco de Cadereyta," *Tamaulipas* (Mexico), July 17, 2007, available at <www.tamaulipasenlinea.com/newsmanager/templates/nota.aspx?articleid=19068&zzoneid=12>.

⁵ Carter; also see "Advierten sobre vínculos terroristas en Latinoamérica [U.N. Warning on Terrorists in Latin America]," July 27, 2007, available at <www.jaliscoenlinea.com/newsmanager/templates/nota.aspx?articleid=1392&zzoneid=14>. Following a 4-day conference, antiterrorism experts at the United Nations warned that terrorist groups might create links with drug trafficking networks and gangs operating in Latin America.

⁶ Dan L. Burton, "U.S.-Mexico Relations," House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Committee on International Relations, Washington, DC, April 26, 2006.

⁷ Robert S. Leiken, "War on Terror: Mexico More Critical than Ever for U.S.," *The Sacramento Bee*, March 24, 2002, available at <www.brookings.edu/views/op-ed/leiken/20020324.htm>.

⁸ Mark S. Steinitz, *The Terrorism and Drug Connection in Latin America's Andean Region*,

Policy Papers on the Americas, vol. 18, study 5 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2002).

⁹ Sara Miller Llana, "Deadly Drug Cartels Moving into Peru," CBS News, April 3, 2007.

¹⁰ Carlos Luken, "The continuing chill in U.S.-Mexico relations," May 23, 2005, available at <www.mexidata.info/id496.html>.

¹¹ For more information on this issue from a global perspective, see Mark S. Steinitz, "Insurgents, Terrorists, and the Drug Trade," *The Washington Quarterly* 8 (Fall 1985), 141-153.

¹² This number is taken from a 3-month assessment of Mexican open news sources. This study was originally undertaken to track those contributions that the Mexican government was making to the war on drugs. This number has not been confirmed by the Mexican government and does not include civilians assassinated and/or killed due to drug trafficking and crime. (The number of civilian lives lost is estimated to be significantly greater than military and government employees.)

¹³ In 2006, 2,000 lives were lost according to a report from the General Accounting Office (GAO). See GAO, "U.S. Counternarcotics Aid to Mexico" (GAO 07-1018). As of August 2007, 1,500 lives were lost to the drug war. See Sam Enriquez, "U.S., Mexico in Talks to Bolster Drug Fight," *The Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 2007.

¹⁴ Jordi Díez and Ian Nicholls, *The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, January 2006), 21, available at <www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub638.pdf>.

¹⁵ Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) is Mexico's state-owned petroleum company, which exports a large amount of natural gas to the United States.

¹⁶ See "Homicide Rate Increases Forty Percent in Guerrero," July 14, 2007, available at <www.notimex.com.mx/admon/mas.php?indices=11&myfecha=2007-07-14&ip=A&clave=&otro=0&mas=7>.

¹⁷ In 2002, Congress passed the American Service-Members' Protection Act (P.L. 107-206, title II), which prohibits military assistance to countries that are party to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and that do not have Article 98 agreements. Article 98 agreements are bilateral agreements between the United States and other recognized nations in which it is agreed that U.S. nationals will not be handed over to the ICC without U.S. consent. Mexico did not enter into these agreements; therefore, the United States has limited the amount of foreign aid.

¹⁸ U.S. foreign relations fall into three categories: friends, partners, and allies. *Friends* are those states with whom Washington has some relationship, *partners* are those we work jointly with on initiatives, and *allies* are those who have close relationships with the United States through treaties and other agreements. Mexico is considered a friend.